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ABSTRACT

Guidelines for conducting departmental reviews are presented to help review panels, departments being reviewed, and administrators. In planning a review, the following considerations are important: the purpose of the review and the terms of reference, the organization of the review and who will conduct it, and the information that will be obtained. Terms of reference include: the quality of the curriculum and instruction; the quality of research development/professional activities within the department; the adequacy of facilities, funds, administration, policies, and support structures; and the adequacy of liaisons between the department and the institution and other departments and groups. The following specific steps of the review are discussed: appointing a review panel, making the terms of reference operational, locating and assembling existing documentation relevant to each term of reference, determining other information that is needed, collecting the data, analyzing and interpreting the findings, producing the draft and final reports, initiating action on study recommendations, and establishing procedures for monitoring progress. Guidelines for institutional policy concerning departmental and school reviews are included. (SW)

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FOREWORD

In his report for the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, Academic Development Units, Professor Richard Johnson said, in reference to knowledge about educational matters:

> There exists a substantial body of knowledge on many of these matters and there are techniques for finding answers to the questions. However, just because the body of knowledge is substantial, just because the processes of higher education are complex, it cannot be expected that the academic pursuing research and teaching in another discipline or the administrator coping with the day-to-day and year-to-year urgencies of an institution can master or keep up with the range of contemporary thinking and research results.

While that is certainly correct it is also true that most staff in tertiary education are interested in carrying out their various tasks and responsibilities well.

To this end many of them would appreciate some guidance on one or other of these tasks and responsibilities. But staff do not have time for a detailed study of the literature on these issues. The other reason for the frustration of staff who go in search for guidance is that many of the publications available are written by people who are conscious of the academic tradition of writing and hence prepare treatises that attempt to be comprehensive, argued in detail and fully documented. This is not what staff need - they need some ideas and pointers that they can relate to their particular circumstances and some brief guidance to further reading if they so desire.

The publications in this HERDSA Green Guide Series are explicitly designed to meet these needs. They are relatively short (about 30 pages), inexpensive, easy to read, and concentrate on supplying ideas rather than a fully argued comprehensive cover of an area. Their bibliographies are deliberately not comprehensive but are designed to be helpful - these are not academic studies of an area but, as the series title indicates, guides.

Each Guide is designed to cover one aspect of a staff member's tasks and responsibilities. Each Guide has been commissioned by the HERDSA Publications Committee and refereed but the content is the responsibility of the particular author(s) and does not necessarily represent the views of the Committee or the Society.

We hope that staff will find the Guides useful and welcome comments on individual Guides and on other areas that could be covered by similar volumes.

HERDSA Publications Committee

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We are grateful to a number of our colleagues who read the booklet in draft form and offered suggestions: Bernice Anderson (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee); Ian Barham (Griffith University); Dr David Boud (University of NSW); Dr Peter Bridgewater (Bureau of Flora and Fauna); Robert Cannon (University of Adelaide); Peter Cullen (Canberra College of Advanced Education); Dr Christine Ewan (University of NSW); Nick Garnham (Swinburne Institute of Technology); Dr Hugh Guthrie (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology); Sue Harlow (Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission); Bernard Hawkins (Swinburne Institute of Technology); Dr Elizabeth Hegarty (University of NSW); Frank Hicks (Canberra College of Advanced Education); Dr Dai Hounsell (University of Lancaster); Brad Imrie (New Zealand Authority for Advanced Vocational Awards); Alan Lonsdale (Western Australian Institute of Technology); Dr Bob Ross (Griffith University); Dr John Sharpham (Western Australian Institute of Technology); Brian Spencer (Macquarie University); Professor Tony Wicken (University of NSW); and in particular to Ingrid Moses of the University of Queensland, for her considerable assistance and constructive criticism.

1 INTRODUCTION

What is a departmental review?

Universities and colleges have always been involved in a variety of reviews and evaluations. The most visible forms of review are the regular accreditation of courses in colleges of advanced education, the evaluation of professional courses by the relevant professional societies, and the evaluation of individuals throughout higher education for purposes of tenure and promotion.

More recently a certain scepticism about the value of higher education, coupled with declining participation rates and some criticism of the quality of higher education, has led governments to impose financial constraints. This in turn has led to a new type of 'review': for example, enquiries as to whether particular institutions should be closed or amalgamated, whether certain departments should be closed down, whether staff should be transferred from one department or institution to another, and so on.

There are many views as to what constitutes a 'review' but this booklet is not about any of the above. We are concerned with departmental or school reviews* which involve a systematic investigation of the structure and functions of an academic department with a view to evaluating and improving its performance. The word 'systematic' is significant. It implies a properly planned and responsibly conducted operation. A departmental review could consist of both self-critical examination within the department and review by a largely external panel, with both activities systematic. Any changes recommended would be designed to improve the quality of a department's work by pointing the way to improved performance. Sometimes, because a department was already functioning extremely well, changes recommended would be very minor; occasionally, they might be substantial, even fundamental. It would be unusual to find a 'perfect' department.

In defining a departmental review it may also be helpful to say what it is not. It is not a backward-looking evaluation confined to judgments on past performance: departments are living entities and any judgments about them should be interim and forward-looking. Nor is a departmental review an appropriate occasion for detailed evaluation of individual staff performance. It will inevitably have some implications for the work of individual staff

*We use the general term "departmental review" to refer to a review of any academic unit: department, school, institute, centre, or unit.

members: their work in aggregate is the department's work. In pointing to any implications for individuals, a review panel should operate on the same forward-looking, constructive principle referred to above, and must at all times have due regard for the rights of individuals.

Why is this booklet needed?

Properly carried out, departmental reviews are constructive exercises that contribute handsomely to forward planning in departments. They can constitute an intelligent and thoughtful response to changing demands, changing situations, and the changing fortunes of higher education.

But this can only happen if they are properly conducted. We have seen examples of departmental reviews which consist entirely of a series of 'data-free' judgments made merely on the basis of the prejudices of members of a review panel; of reviews which have managed to alienate the entire staff of the department; and of reviews that have not diagnosed any of the significant ills of a troubled department.

This booklet is written to help those involved in reviews - members of review panels, members of a department being reviewed, and administrators - to carry them out in a professional manner. It has been prepared as a guide and introduction only, and is not intended as a universal prescription. Many of the details of how a review is conducted will depend on the size of an institution, whether it is a college or a university, and the size of the department reviewed. A much more complete treatment is available in Roe, McDonald and Moses (1985).

Are departmental reviews a good idea?

There are those who would suggest that systematic evaluation of departments should not be carried out. The reasons that can be advanced to justify this view are familiar to us all, and are covered by Roe and McDonald (1984, pp.9-13). They include a fear that those doing the evaluating will not be competent, or sufficiently sympathetic, or that they will use the wrong criteria; or that reviews cost money and don't necessarily serve any useful purpose, and may actually do harm. Staff associations are also concerned that reviews could be used to further erode the situation of academic staff in higher education and could divert time and energy from more important academic pursuits.

It is true that a badly conducted review may indeed fulfil the legitimate fears expressed above. But the benefits of well-

conducted reviews have been substantial. We and our colleagues have seen examples of departments given a new lease of life and opportunities to pursue new directions, of individuals who became aware for the first time that their value to a department was recognised, of improved organisational arrangements, of better teaching arrangements, and other benefits arising from a serious introspective examination of activities which may have proceeded unquestioned for some time. Reviews can also provide valuable input into decisions on institution-wide planning policies.

II PLANNING A REVIEW

1 What is the purpose of the review?

There is a wide variety of possible reasons for reviewing a department, ranging from the desire of its own members to obtain information which will enable them to improve that performance to an institution's attempt to justify a decision already made to the detriment of that department. The latter reason for a review is morally indefensible. Indeed, a review which simply passes judgments on a department is difficult to justify. If judgments are made about the quality of a department, the institution has an obligation to provide encouragement, opportunities and facilities for any defects to be remedied: departmental reviews should manifest the important link between evaluation and development and should, wherever possible, point the way towards improved performance.

Those who have written on the subject emphasise the need for reviews to have an honest, constructive purpose. The central purpose should be seen to be improvement, not judgment: identifying priorities for development, planning for the future, and reassessing existing commitments and activities.

It should also be noted that for the staff of the department, the benefit of the review lies in the process - the preparation, data collection, discussions, and questioning - as much as in the final report.

2 What are the terms of reference?

The scope of departmental reviews can vary considerably. However, it is common for reviews to be concerned with a department's course offerings, teaching, research/professional activities, staffing, administration, and future needs.

Terms of reference would normally include the following, adapted to suit each particular institution:

i The appropriateness, quality and balance of the curriculum, and the quality of teaching.

ii The appropriateness, quality and balance of research development/professional activities carried out within the department.

iii Whether accommodation, facilities, allocation of teaching/research/equipment funds, internal

administration, institutional policies and administration, support structures and staffing arrangements are serving the department and the students adequately.

iv Whether there is adequate liaison between this department and cognate departments, the rest of the institution, and the relevant outside bodies.

As a consequence of their deliberations, a review panel would normally be asked to report on:

v Whether the department should continue in its present form, and whether any changes should be made to its structure.

vi Desirable future directions for the department.

A review panel would normally be asked to report on those matters, taking into account national and international standards in the discipline or profession. It would naturally be expected that they would go beyond mere judgment and would suggest improvements wherever appropriate.

In addition to the above fairly standard terms of reference, there will be others which are somewhat more evanescent, appearing as certain concerns become fashionable and, in time, being replaced by others. A current example would be to request a panel to suggest how any new developments can be funded by contractions elsewhere in the department. There will also be other items specific to the institution or to the particular department: for example, interactions between different disciplines or areas, whether a department was preparing its graduates adequately for the profession, or the role of departmental seminars.

It is inevitable that in the course of a review, the panel will form opinions about the members of staff who comprise the department, and in some cases these opinions will affect their final recommendations. However, the review of individuals as members of a department, in order to make judgments on that department, should not be confused with the in-depth evaluation of individuals. It would not normally be appropriate for a departmental review to duplicate an institution's procedures for reviewing staff performance.

3 How will it be organised?

A number of key questions occur under this heading: what machinery exists or must be established for conducting the review; who will carry it out; what information will be sought, from whom, and how. These questions are addressed on the following pages.

Special attention needs to be paid to the provision of administrative support; the requirements will differ for each review. But gathering and summarising information, preparing for meetings, attending meetings and assisting in preparing the draft and final reports might take the equivalent of a month's work by someone in a senior clerical position. This provision needs to be consciously made, for if the support is skimped, if the review committee does not have the information it needs in the form it wants, its discussions will suffer.

Some general principles which should be observed in the organisation of a review are given in Section V.

4 Who will do it?

There is a wide range of possibilities, from a single evaluator or team entirely from outside the institution, to a working party drawn entirely from within the department itself. The composition of a review panel will depend on the institutional context and the purpose of the review. There is no general formula, but we would argue for a panel that contains

- the necessary expertise in the subject(s) and the profession,
- knowledge of the working of the institution, and
- competence in principles and methods of evaluation.

There is a considerable difference of opinion as to how the above requirements are best met in a panel which needs to remain a workable size. We would argue for the inclusion of the first four categories below, but arguments can be made in favour of every category.

i. Experts in the subject(s) from outside the department and probably outside the institution.

ii. Representatives of the profession (if appropriate)

iii. A senior administrative officer of the institution, as secretary to panel

iv. A specialist in evaluation, either as a full member of the panel or consultant. (Such specialists can help the panel plan the review so as to ensure that maximum benefit is derived from it, they can advise on procedures, methodology and give other practical advice, and they can even gather, analyse and present data.)

v. Members of staff of the institution (outside the department)

vi. Members of the department

vii. Chief Executive or Deputy

viii. Students or graduates.

The arguments that a substantial proportion of a review team should be external are based on the need for objectivity, impartiality, and fresh perspectives. The arguments against relate mainly to the emphasis placed on the value of self-study. Some would claim that an institutional ethos where evaluation is initiated internally and carried out responsibly in an atmosphere where both departmental autonomy and honest self-scrutiny are prized is the desirable ideal. But even an internally controlled departmental review is likely to make use of one or two 'outsiders', for the reasons given above.

Most review panels are a compromise, with external and internal members in various proportions. The question of representation is also a complex one. If local tradition demands that all interested parties should be directly represented, the panel may be too large to be efficient. If reviews are in two stages (with a review panel operating at the second stage, preceded by a departmental self-study) there may then be less need for substantial departmental membership of the panel. Indeed, more important than actual departmental representation is an arrangement that ensures that a review has considerable interaction between the panel and staff of the department.

5 What information, from whom, and how?

In carrying out a departmental review, a key issue is deciding what information should be obtained, and this will, of course, be dictated by the terms of reference. Some information will be common to most reviews; for example, recent annual reports, information about staff, information about courses offered, the departmental budget, data on student enrolment and graduation rates, publication records, and so on. However review panels or evaluators are often tempted to request much more

information than they can effectively use. Clarification of the purposes of any particular review will help ensure that this does not happen.

On the other hand, there are enormous dangers in the opposite extreme: the data-free review. There are many examples of reviews based on brief visits, opinions and impressions without the benefit of anything but the scantiest information. However such reviews are increasingly challenged and are becoming less likely.

The skill, in short, is in using a sufficient amount of the right sort of information. In the case of a comprehensive review, such information could be selected from the following list:

i. Philosophy, goals and image of a department

... the department's goals, how its activities relate to its goals, the weight of 'professional' versus 'general' education, the department's image both within and outside the institution, etc.

ii. Academic staff and staffing

... numbers, ranks and experience of staff, research, professional and other interests, provisions for staff induction and development, policies and procedures on staff evaluation, etc.

iii. Students

... admission standards, number of students applying/admitted, data on progress, performance, transfer and dropout (for both undergraduates and, where appropriate, postgraduates), reasons for dropout, etc.

iv. Curriculum, teaching, assessment

... overall goals, structure (including integration of different subjects and between different areas), depth of treatment, contact hours, balance between theory and practice, texts and other teaching materials, quality of teaching, adequacy of assessment, quality of supervision of research students, provision for ongoing evaluation and monitoring, etc. (A detailed treatment of these issues is contained in chapters 2 and 3 of Roe and McDonald (1984).)

v. Research

... individual research projects; team research, integration of postgraduate students into team projects; allocation of research funds across projects, research

grants, areas in need of further research, etc.

vi. Resources, facilities and organisation

... expenditure of funds, criteria for distributing funds, costs per student, physical facilities, equipment, teaching support services, organisational and committee structure, provision for planning, etc.

vii. The future

... staffing constraints, possible flexibility, likely developments in the department's field, possible changes in student demand, etc.

The simple answer to the question of 'from whom?' is 'all parties with a legitimate interest'. In a departmental review, the head, staff and students of that department, graduates, deans, central administrators, professional organisations might all be sources of information. The methods used should be appropriate to the nature of the questions asked, and the number of people involved. In practical terms, relatively restricted categories of people, such as department heads, deans, senior administrators, are more likely to be interviewed, while questionnaires may be more practicable with the (presumably large) body of students.

Decisions on all three questions - what information, from whom and how - are more likely to be the right decisions, as far as the ultimate effectiveness of the review is concerned, if they are made in the context of continual reminders of the purpose, focus, scope and terms of reference of the review. The point is so obvious that to state it is almost embarrassing. Yet it is not uncommon for the hunt for information, once it has begun, to develop a kind of wild momentum of its own. Eager evaluators need to pause sometimes in the excitement of the chase and reflect on why and where they are running.

6 How will the information be processed?

It sometimes happens that much of the information available (already documented) or gathered for a departmental review is not really analysed at all. It rather approximates a patchwork quilt of extreme variety and complexity, which is appraised by the review panel: they reach their conclusions by impression rather than through analysis. This is a risky procedure, resting on the dubious assumption that a number of subjective impressions results in an objective judgment. Personal interpretations of the data, undue concentration on aspects which happen to catch an individual's attention, are inevitable in departmental reviews. It would be unrealistic to expect otherwise. Nevertheless, such bias can be kept to a minimum if

there is sufficient determination - and sufficient resources - to analyse properly the data which deserve analysis and are capable of it.

Data analysis requires considerable expertise and experience if it is to be carried out professionally, and any treatment of it is beyond the scope of this booklet. The following 'guidelines' are offered as points which review panels might like to ponder:

i. There is little solace in completing a brilliant data analysis if the wrong problem is being addressed.

ii. Those who conduct reviews and those who intend to make decisions based upon them will benefit greatly if they plan data analysis together.

iii. There are usually many, rather than few, useful ways to analyze data collected as part of an evaluation.

iv. Ethical issues have a way of turning up in data analysis.

v. Take care when moving from description to association to prediction.

vi. Expect the data analysis as it unfolds to guide you; don't overplan.

vii. Data analysis has a way of taking longer than anticipated.

A full treatment is contained in Winston (1984), from which the above list is adapted.

7 What kind of report will be made, and to whom?

Reporting follows naturally from the collection and analysis of data and the exercising of professional judgment by members of the panel. The possibility that data may be collected and analysed to bolster a report already written (at least in someone's mind) has already been acknowledged and deplored. Aside from such hidden agendas, one would expect a report to present the data as fully and faithfully as possible, and to interpret the data with both insight and objectivity. In all this, the evaluators follow the conventions observed by researchers in writing a research report.

There are, however, some significant differences. The most important is that in most cases the report of a review panel is meant to have immediate practical consequences. Those conducting a departmental review may still see their responsibility

as very limited; as with many research reports, the data may be presented, cautiously interpreted if at all, and readers left to supply their own conclusions and recommendations. At the other extreme, the report may have authoritative conclusions and firm recommendations, so that those conducting the review have assumed a considerable responsibility for bringing about change in the department.

Another significant consideration in reporting on a departmental review is the audience (or audiences) to which it is addressed. The question of how it originated is obviously relevant here, together with the context in which it is taking place. A review report may be to the head of the institution, to a faculty or school, to the department head, or to all members of the department. Often the evaluator, even though addressing the institution's head, will have members of the department very much in mind as reading, acting upon, potentially profiting from, the report. Thus they constitute in some senses a second audience. Everyone with a legitimate interest in the report is a potential audience, and it would be normal practice for all such individuals and groups to see the final report.

8 How will implementation be facilitated?

The first steps towards implementation should be taken long before the report is written. In the very planning of a departmental review, the prospects for implementation of whatever report emerges should be considered and measures taken to enhance those prospects. Such measures include creation of a favourable climate, informing and consulting members of the department wherever possible, and ensuring a level of commitment to the review so that many will have at least an expectation that the report will be implemented, and at best a personal stake in its implementation.

Other moves likely to assist implementation involve directing different aspects of the report to the 'right' audiences, inviting interested parties to comment on the report in its draft stage, and in general doing everything possible to ensure that the report will be favourably received.

The conservatism of most educational institutions makes it imperative that there are explicit procedures for the implementation of reports: the possibilities for the adoption of delaying tactics and of making only cosmetic changes are too great to leave implementation to chance. Some person or group needs to be identified as having the responsibility for carrying out recommendations, and there should be time limits for action; it may be that deadlines for each stage are feasible and/or a report on the implementation may be required after, say, two years. This report should be accompanied by a copy of the original review

report so that all parties can see what has been done and what left undone.

This is not to suggest that every recommendation of every review committee should always be implemented. A decision against implementing a report may be taken because it will cost too much, in time, money or other resources, or the advantages likely to be gained are judged as insufficient to justify the cost, or because making a change for the better in one place may have as an inevitable consequence a change for the worse elsewhere, or because it might not be capable of implementation with existing staff, or because in some way the proposed change is incompatible in policy or philosophy with broader institutional considerations. There are these and no doubt other respectable reasons which may result in a failure to implement. Whenever they are advanced, however, they should be subjected to rigorous examination, lest they are being used simply as excuses for inaction by those who have other less convincing reasons for resisting the implementation of a review report.

III STEPS IN CARRYING OUT A REVIEW

In undertaking a departmental review, what should one actually do? In this section a number of steps, in plausible sequence, is suggested. The steps should be treated as suggestions or guidelines rather than prescriptions. There will be good reasons in particular contexts for omitting or combining steps or interposing others.

One important issue present throughout the planning and conduct of a departmental review is who is to be responsible for what. Clarity on this question is essential, although not all steps in carrying out a review will necessarily be taken by the same individual or group. Reviews have often failed in one or more important particular because clarity was lacking.

1 Appoint a review panel

This first step will be taken by whoever has overall responsibility for the review: the chief executive of the institution or its academic board or by a committee which is charged with the overall supervision and monitoring of a programme of departmental reviews for the whole institution; or, in the case of an internally controlled review, by the department itself or its head. (If there is to be an overseeing committee, appointment of its members will, of course, be Step 1).

Some comments on the possible constitution of a review panel are given in II.4.

2 Take the decisions listed in Section II above

This - the entire planning process - is obviously a very large step, involving several hours of concentrated work by the review team. Although the early taking of all the listed decisions is strongly advised, the team may find reasons to postpone some of them or make only a general and tentative decision at first.

Not all the decisions need be the responsibility of the review team. If, for example, there is a supervisory committee as noted above, it may take the decisions on purpose, scope, terms of reference, and even on ensuring implementation, before a review team is even appointed. The nature of the review report and its audiences may also be treated as matters of institution policy and decided by its academic board and/or chief executive.

Therefore, depending on the authority structure with respect to reviews, the two above steps may involve additional steps, and a variety of individuals or groups may be involved in

taking them. The important thing is that, by this point, a team for carrying out the review has been established; it has clearly defined responsibilities; and all significant planning decisions have been taken (by someone) and are clearly understood both by the review team and by those who are to be reviewed. It is then ready to proceed to Step 3.

3 Make the terms of reference operational

The terms of reference may be expressed in such specific detail as to make this step unnecessary. Usually, however, terms of reference are general, particularly so if they represent a policy determination for all reviews to be carried out in the institution (see for example II.2). Examples would be 'Assess the academic quality of this department' or 'Decide whether the department should continue in its present form and whether changes are needed which would increase its effectiveness.' Faced with such terms of reference, it is an important task for the review team to turn them into specific and researchable questions. If asked to decide whether a department should continue in its present form, the committee has to consider what it needs to know in order to be able to make that decision, what aspects of the present functioning of the department it will study - in general to translate its broad brief into practical, action-ready terms such as will facilitate the steps which follow.

How the committee does this will depend on how they intend to go about their task. One possible approach is to identify, as quickly and easily as possible, the main 'issues' in the department, and to then concentrate on those. But first the committee would need to satisfy themselves that they know enough about the department to decide what those issues are.

4 Locate existing documentation relevant to each term of reference

The terms of reference are now in a form which in effect has identified the key issues to be addressed in this particular review. Much of the information relevant to those issues will already be documented somewhere. But it will need to be located and collected. One term of reference might be 'Trends in course development, student enrolment, and student performance in the department over the last ten years'; and all the relevant information can, in principle, be retrieved from department or institution records.

5 Decide what other information is needed

When the existing documentation has been located, it will have to be assembled (See Step 6). At the same time, the review team will be deciding what additional information it needs for each term of reference. This step is likely to involve the team in its first serious conflict between ideals and reality. The decisions provisionally taken in Step 3 as to what it needs to know may now appear unduly optimistic. Faced with the imminent task of collecting the information, and perhaps somewhat daunted by a potentially huge quantity of existing documentation, the team's determination as to what it needs to know may weaken a little.

6 Assemble existing documentation

Again, close to the realities, the team may opt to be somewhat selective rather than comprehensive. At least it will expect those providing the material to provide it in summary form wherever this is practicable. It should be noted, however, that this may involve several steps, depending on the context. For example, a review team, particularly if it is doing its own information-gathering, may need to give quite specific instructions to those providing information as to what to provide and in what form; or it may need to have a preliminary look at samples of the material available before it can give such instructions. If the review team has a research assistant, it may give him/her detailed briefing and/or leave to him/her certain decisions about what to get and how. Thus, although 'Assemble existing documentation' is listed here as a single step, the assembling of what the review team will actually use, and in usable form, may be a series of operations.

7 Establish procedures, devise instruments, etc. for collecting other information.

As indicated in the introduction, this sequence of steps may be only approximate. Step 5 - deciding what information not already documented will be needed - may be taken partially after Step 4 and partially after Step 6. It is also possible that Steps 5 and 7 will be repeated, perhaps more than once. In other words, just as study of the existing documentation will suggest a need for other information, so will study of that other information lead to the identification and collection of further information. The need for an additional stage of information-gathering may become apparent either before or after any one set of information is processed, or indeed both before and after.

However, each time the review team decides to seek further information it will need to establish procedures for getting that information; or, if it is fortunate enough to have a skilled and experienced research assistant, request that person to devise the means of obtaining it.

Information for a review panel

Some examples of the sort of information a review panel might use are given below, although the list is not intended to be prescriptive. Note that some of the information would normally be already documented but other items would need to be prepared or gathered.

i. Statement of the institution's policies and procedures for reviews, including the reasons for this department being reviewed at this time

ii. A briefing paper on the background of the department, organisation, current status, and anticipated future development

iii. Copies of departmental handbooks and annual reports

iv. Departmental budget

v. Academic staffing - establishment, present members (names, ages, levels, areas of academic interest, c.v.'s) - and level of support staff

vi. Information on courses offered by the department - course structures, requirements, course outlines, teaching and assessment methods

vii. Information on calculation of teaching loads

viii. Data on enrolment patterns over the last five years, students:staff ratios, graduation rates, progress and dropout data (plus, possibly, comparable data from other institutions)

ix. Pass and grade statistics of courses in the department

x. Information on research in the department - projects, publications, other output, grants received.

xi. Results of evaluations of selected or key courses

xii. Table of destinations of graduates from the department and in the case of professional courses, how this relates to the department's intentions.

xiii. Reports on any specific area of interest - e.g. student workload, effectiveness of prerequisites, reflections of graduates, reasons for student withdrawal

8 Collect this information

The size of this step will vary greatly according to the terms of reference of the departmental review. Where a review is largely confined to matters on which adequate documentation already exists, additional enquiries will be few. At the other extreme, 'collecting the information' may involve lengthy questionnaires to students, graduates, employers, members of a profession, together with extensive interviews, conducted by or on behalf of the review panel, of many individuals, including all staff of the department under review.

9 Analyse or otherwise process the information

This step, to deal with information specially gathered for the review, parallels Step 6 with respect to existing documentation. The purpose in each case is to get the data into a form in which it can be written up as a report. This may mean, in the case of quantifiable information (such as that collected by questionnaires), production of tables. Data from interviews may be recorded, transcribed, or more probably summarised in some way.

10 Interpret the data

This vitally important step may take place over a number of meetings and discussions by the review team. It is the process of passing from description to evaluation. The review team has all its information in some organised form, information which is, in essence, a detailed description of the department's functioning. It will most likely also include a number of individual opinions about the department, which are evaluative in nature. But the review team is now in a position to do its evaluation: to ask itself 'What does it all mean? What conclusions should we draw? What weight should we attach to these facts and to these opinions?' and other such questions. The point has arrived at which the review team must exercise its informed professional judgment about the department.

In interpreting the data and formulating recommendations, members of review panels should resist the temptation to put their personal stamp on the department; they are being asked to review a department, not to say whether they personally would prefer to do things differently.

That small piece of advice is as far as we can go in a short handbook in directly assisting the process of judgment formation.

We assume that a thoughtfully constituted review panel containing, say, some biochemists will be able (following such plans and steps as those outlined here and employing their own academic qualities) to arrive at informed professional judgments about a biochemistry department.

In some reviews the time will come when it is necessary to face difficult issues squarely. Professor Richard Johnson, who has chaired many reviews at the Australian National University, speaks of 'lancing the boil' : the committee members have learned to trust each other, somebody gets impatient and decides to speak openly, and - with a great sense of relief - the committee begins to come to grips with the real problems of the department and the measures needed to improve the position. An experienced chairman can anticipate and expedite this process.

11 Draft a report

A review team may approach this task in several different ways, partly depending upon how it intends to structure its report, partly upon who is going to write it. Some sections of the report may indeed be drafted quite early (as early as Steps 5 and 6): for example, on the history of the department or comprising other self-contained descriptive information which is already documented and where no further enquiries are to be made. On the other hand, the team may decide to write nothing (except members' own notes) until everything is in front of them, and the task may then be divided between team members, each taking responsibility for a section, or undertaken by the chairman after lengthy discussions as to what should be included in the report. One, two, or even more drafts may be produced and considered by the review team before there is a draft regarded as appropriate for more public scrutiny (see step 12).

12 Distribute draft report for comment by parties with a legitimate interest

The draft should then be viewed by all those in any way affected by the review, and their comments invited, in writing, to reach the review team by a specified date. This step is not only a matter of principle, in line with the undertaking that there will be maximum consultation at all stages of the review; it is also a safeguard for the review team that they have not missed or misinterpreted something of significance, since any sins of commission or omission will certainly be drawn to their attention.

13 Produce and distribute final report

The review team will meet to consider reactions to its draft report and to decide on any changes which should be made. It will then issue its final report. Normally a review report has been agreed to by all members of the review team. In exceptional circumstances, one or more of its members might produce a dissenting postscript or minority report, disagreeing with one or more points in the review findings or recommendations. Such dissension is however likely to damage the credibility and limit the effectiveness of the report.

14 Initiate action on recommendations

Normally, Step 13 is the last step for which the review team has responsibility. The consequences of the report are, of course, crucial; in fact, in terms of getting 'value for money' from the review, they are a major justification for the whole exercise; but the steps required after the issuing of the report are usually taken by somebody else. These statements must be qualified by 'normally' and 'usually' because their truth depends upon the institution's authority structure as it relates to departmental reviews (see steps 1 and 2 above). Reviews are, of course, no substitute for the normal decision-making procedures of academic institutions, and can indeed feed into them. However, in certain circumstances, the review team may have some kind of monitoring responsibility or be the recipient of reports concerning implementation of its findings (see below).

Action on the review team's recommendations may be initiated in a number of different ways. The report may go to the chief executive and/or to the academic board and a request to the department to implement some or all of the recommendations may follow. It may go to chief executive and/or academic board simply for noting, with onus for initiating action remaining with the head of department or perhaps passing to the relevant dean or to one or other of the institution's standing committees. Either it is a matter of institution policy that review reports are acted upon, or someone must decide, for each review, that some or all of the recommendations are to be accepted and put into effect.

15 Establish procedures for monitoring progress in implementation

Action which has been initiated can peter out. A review team's findings can get lost amid the welter of activity in a busy department unless there is some mechanism for ensuring the

continuation of action towards implementation. Progress may be reported to any one of a variety of individuals or committees, but it is vital that reports are made and to a specified recipient. Whatever procedures for monitoring progress towards implementation are established, they should include target dates for the end of the whole exercise, i.e. dates when all recommendations which are to be implemented should have been put into effect.

IV CREATING AND MAINTAINING AN APPROPRIATE CLIMATE FOR A REVIEW

Much of the advice contained in this booklet, on the planning of a review, and on the steps which may be taken in carrying it out, has the important objective of creating and maintaining an appropriate climate; which, of course, means a favourable climate.

This can be a formidable task which all those involved in sponsoring, planning and conducting reviews should approach with continuing concern and forethought. Positive, constructive purposes have been emphasised in this booklet, but it would be naive to suppose that protestations of such purposes would by themselves provide adequate reassurance. A statement like 'I want only to help you improve your performance' can be interpreted as 'There is something wrong with your performance. It needs improving.' It may be seen as assuming, or (even worse!) as about to make public, some deficiency in a department's performance.

Statements about constructive purposes need to be translated into positive action or at least into firm commitments to positive action. Negative commitments - what the review panel will not do - are equally important: for example, that there are no hidden agendas, that significant information about the review procedures is not being withheld, that those who have given evidence privately will not be identified, that the review panel will not ignore comments on their draft report.

Key features in creating and maintaining a favourable climate include the following: making purposes explicit; choosing a review team which has credibility (for example, not only with appropriate external members, but with members and/or a secretary thoroughly conversant with the political and administrative practices of the institution); keeping all interested parties informed, with widespread and genuine consultation; ensuring confidentiality wherever appropriate; providing opportunity for departmental comment before the report is finalised; and creating and fulfilling expectations that the report will be implemented. Unless department staff believe that something is likely to happen as a result of the review, the climate for the review will be poisoned by cynicism, which will adversely affect future reviews in that institution. On the other hand, the implementation of any one review may assist the climate of any future review if major emphasis is placed on the strengths of the department. It is important to take constructive action about weaknesses, but no less important to build on strengths, and, in particular, to praise those whose performance is sound and who, because they are typically taken for granted, get little or no recognition of their substantial merits. In summary, the link between reviews and development, change and improvement should be recognised and continually stressed.

The acceptability of reviews is obviously enhanced if they are a normal feature of life in an institution: if, for example, it is institutional policy that all departments and sections are reviewed at regular intervals. There is then no stigma attached to being reviewed, nobody need feel discriminated against, everyone is being treated alike.

V IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL POLICY

In this final section, key points for institutions to consider in creating and maintaining an appropriate climate for reviews are listed. Since they also serve as a reminder of important issues referred to in Sections II and III, they may be read as a set of guidelines for institutional policy concerning departmental and school reviews.

1. Reviews should form part of the normal practices of educational institutions, helping departments to chart their way forward and demonstrating the active self-scrutiny which the community expects.

2. In establishing a system of reviews, an institution needs to provide leadership by

   i. 'selling' the concept of regular reviews to staff as a contribution to academic health of the institution and as an aid to rational planning - they are, after all, normal in many large institutions;

   ii. educating staff as to the objectives, conduct and possible outcomes of such reviews;

   iii. providing the means by which any deficiencies identified in a review can be remedied.

3. The institution needs to protect the rights of individual staff members by means of principles governing access to information and issues of confidentiality such as the following:

   i. the purposes of the review, the areas to be examined and the terms of reference should be public, and staff of the department should be given an opportunity to comment on them before they are finalised;

   ii. all staff of the department should have access to the review panel;

   iii. all staff of the department should be provided with a list of the documentation considered by the panel;

   iv. the authorship of information given to a review panel by individuals should be confidential to the panel;

v. panel discussions should be confidential to members of the panel;

vi. although it is impossible to review a department's performance without in some sense reviewing the performance of the individuals who staff that department, no evaluative comments concerning individuals should appear in the review report;

vii. members of the department should have an opportunity to comment on the report and its recommendations while it is still in draft form;

viii. unless there are special and compelling reasons against it, the report should be made available to all those with a legitimate interest.

4. Review panels should

i. be competent and impartial and be seen as such by the department under review;

ii. contain at least one recognised expert in the relevant discipline from outside the institution, and where appropriate a member of the relevant profession;

iii. have some continuity of membership, if possible, when several different departments are being reviewed; for example, the same senior administrative officer to service the panels and/or the same chairperson.

5. The institution needs to establish guidelines for the conduct, reporting and implementation of reviews that will emphasise their constructive nature. These will be the principles on which review panels will operate, in addition to those already set down in 3. above. They should include:

i. the review panel must obtain relevant data to inform their judgment rather than making 'data-free' recommendations; in particular, treating with extreme caution comments and opinions from anyone of whatever seniority, unless and until they can be supported by evidence;

ii. the panel should take professional advice (if necessary) to ensure that the procedures are appropriate to the time available and to the particular circumstances of the review;

iii. it should also consult with staff of the department being reviewed concerning procedures;

iv. it should be generous in the extent of notice given to the department to gather and provide the data it needs, and this may include scope for a department to conduct its own prior review, if that is the institution's policy;

v. it should, however, complete the total review process in the shortest time practicable so as not to lose momentum and credibility.

6. The review panel should produce a report which

i. contains clearly stated recommendations which can be implemented;

ii. discloses any limitations of the data on which recommendations are based, and any limitations of the review itself;

iii. contains reasons for all comments and recommendations (including relevant data where available), so that the basis on which they are made is clear.

7. The institution and/or its review panel can expedite the implementation of recommendations by

i. suggesting the means by which changes may be brought about;

ii. giving specific individuals responsibilities for changes;

iii. defining an implementation period (say two years) with a follow-up at the end of the period and a report to an appropriate body.

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